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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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# THE MAN OF THE BILLION WORDS

by  
Mindy Bergner

Jon Peterson rolled out of his hammock. With the air of a man who has a son to mow the lawn, he leaned on the rail fence to watch his neighbor mow.

"Laird, be careful you don't run over fairies dancing in the grass," Jon called. "Maybe you should use scissors."

"They won't be out until midnight," Laird said.

"If you've started to believe those fairy tales you teach, it's time to retire," Jon said. "You've gone daft."

Laird Phillips shifted the mower into neutral. He mopped his face with a handkerchief and ran bony fingers through his wild, white hair.

"Fairy tales are the sunny country of common sense," he said. "G.K. Chesterton."

"There!" Jon said. "If you had any common sense you'd wait till evening to mow your lawn. It must be 95 already."

Phillips' dog barked at Jon's son Pete as he backed his Mustang out of the driveway. Jon winced.

"You don't like dogs, do you?" Phillips said.

"No, and they don't like me," Jon answered. "You know where a dog always sniffs you. No sense of shame. They slobber, they have bad breath, they must have filthy mouths. They'd just as soon knock you down as look at you, and their claws tear holes in your pants. Little dogs are too nervous, and if they can't sleep with you they bark all night. Big dogs are too lazy."

He stared at Phillips' dog. "What kind of dog is that, anyway? It's a funny color, almost green."

"Just a mongrel," Phillips said, "though the Highland fairies have a dark green dog, the Cu Sith."

"Uh huh," Jon said. "I'm going in to watch the ball game. Man's best friend is his remote control; no dog ever learned to change--" Jon's mouth flapped open and shut, but he spoke no more words. He touched his throat.

"Laryngitis?" Phillips asked. "Or else you've used all the words the Daoine Sidhe -- the People of Peace -- gave you."

Jon shook his head and went inside the house. As he searched the family room for the remote control, his wife Marion brought him a glass of lemonade.

"Pete's going to Deb's after the movie," she said.

He did not answer, so she tickled his chin.

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue?"

He pushed her away and drove to a clinic at the mall, but the doctor who examined him found no signs of infection.

"I'm sending you to Public for tests tomorrow," the doctor said. "I'm sure they'll find out what's wrong."

But the tests -- and dozens more over the next three months -- revealed no reason for his inability to speak.

The last test results came in the mail one December afternoon. They were negative. Jon crumpled the form and tossed it in the fire, then wrote "Call Laird" on an envelope and gave it to Marion. Phillips came five minutes later.

"We'll try your fairies," Marion said. "What do we do? Eye of newt and wart of frog?"

"Clean the ashes out of your hearth and build a low fire," Phillips said. "Set a loaf of fresh-baked bread, a tub of clean water, and a boy's suit, size 6, in front of it. Then go to bed."

Marion glanced at Jon.

"What have you to lose?" Phillips said.

Jon nodded. When everything was ready, he showed Phillips to the guest bedroom.

"Whatever else you hear, don't go out until you hear bells," Phillips said. "The Daoine Sidhe like their privacy."

At midnight Jon and Marion heard a harp playing and men and women dancing; they heard the gurgles and splashes of babies being bathed.

Then a hush, and after the hush bells tinkled. Jon and Marion followed Phillips into the living room. The fairies had gone, though the bells still tinkled and the harp picked up their melody. The Petersons and Phillips felt a cushion of music rising under their feet. It carried them through the picture window as if it were a beaded curtain.

On the other side of the window, the Petersons' driveway had become a forest path, Phillips' house a

woodcutter's hut. The music carried them through a grove of beeches to a woman seated on a silver throne. A fair-haired woman, she was half Jon's height. Ugly, too, he thought. Ranged round the throne were a dozen nobles; by their dress, some had hunted that night and others had danced at the Petersons'.

"Professor Phillips, welcome," the woman said, in a voice the silver of a butterfly's underside. "I am Niamh, mistress of the Council of the Daoine Sidhe. As you have honored us, Professor, so we honor you. What boon may we grant you?"

Phillips bowed. "My friend Jon Peterson" -- here Jon bowed -- "has used the full sum of words allotted him. He begs the council to grant him more."

"Abitha," Niamh said, and a wizened fairy toddled to her side. He wore the clothes Marion had put out.

"One billion words, even," Abitha said, showing Phillips a page in a red leather book.

"Perhaps Mr. Peterson could purchase--" Phillips began.

"We will consider it," Niamh said. The nobles gathered at her throne, the wind whispered around them, and then the nobles stepped aside. "A hermit Liam of Ynys Gybi has just taken a vow of silence," Niamh said. "Jon Peterson may purchase his unused allotment, 879,383,276 words. He is cautioned to hoard them, as he can afford to pay the purchase price only once."

Jon, reaching for his wallet, remembered he stood before the council in his pajamas.

"We require not money," Niamh said, "but what is even more precious to us: fresh blood."

Jon stepped between Marion and the council.

"Not that," Niamh said, wrinkling her nose. "I meant that we are inbred and must have fresh bloodlines. As payment we will take your--"

Harp and bells covered her final word. Back in his own house, Jon cleared his throat and said, "Thank you, Laird, for what you've done. I take back all those smart remarks about fairies."

"Before you thank me, perhaps you should see to Pete," Phillips said.

He followed Jon and Marion into Pete's room. The boy was gone.

"The Daoine Sidhe took him," Phillips said. "I am sorry."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Jon said. "I oughta--"

Just then a violent gust shook the house and Pete dropped out of the air onto his bed. A lace cap hung on his ear, a bootie on his big toe.

Niamh appeared at the end of the bed. "Abitha told us your son was 16 days old. This creature is too large for our crib. We revoke the agreement."

Complaining that Abitha was too young for his job, Niamh vanished. Pete rolled over and snored.

"If I leave now, I'll just make my 7:30 class," Phillips said. "Tonight we'll try again. Perhaps Niamh will accept something else as payment."

So the Petersons once again set out bread and clothes and water, and the fairies once again visited their hearth. At 1 a.m. harp and bells carried the Petersons and Phillips to the council.

"How dare you approach us again!" Niamh said, her voice now the silver of thunderclouds. "You have nothing we value."

"We ask if we might perform some task for the council, or undertake some heroic quest," Phillips said. "Hercules cleaned the Augean stables--"

"King Augeas keeps them cleaner now," Niamh said. As she raised her hands to command harp and bells, a noble wiped bread crumbs from his lips and whispered in her ear. She nodded.

"Bring us the Cu Sith," she said.

"The cush?" Marion asked.

"Coo-Shee," Phillips said. "A dog as big as a yearling bull, capable of killing mortal dogs or men. Mistress Niamh, what happened to it?"

"The giant of Carn Dhalna stole him," she said. "A witch enchanted his castle against us. While he lives, we cannot enter it."

A giant who has a witch for an ally? Jon thought. Talking's not worth it.

He turned to Phillips, who said, "Carn Dhalna's in Cornwall. We'll need passports, plane tickets, and--"

"Oh, for--" Niamh said. A harp jangled and bells clanged, and the Petersons and Phillips plopped onto a snow-covered moor outside a castle. Phillips knocked on a small door set in the gate. A pale, raven-haired man opened the door and said:

"To Carn Dhalna ye are welcome,

"For once in, ye stay till Hell come."

Behind the gatekeeper a voice boomed, "Who waits without, Bob?"

"By the fairy blood in his veins, it'll be Professor Phillips."

"The only man to ride the water horse and live? Bid him welcome."

Bob led Jon, Marion, and Phillips into a room the size of the Petersons' house. Jon expected a witch to appear at any moment, but the only fire and smoke came from the hearth where the giant warmed his hands.

"I'll shake Phillips' hand, I



will," the giant said. He lumbered toward them, boots thudding inches from his visitors as they ran for cover.

"The giant, he's blind as a bat," Bob whispered to Marion.

The giant stood still. "Whatever you want you shall have, Rider of the Water Horse," he said.

"Then I make bold to ask for your dog," Phillips said.

"That alone you may not have," the giant said. "I raised him from a pup."

"You stole him from the Daoine Sidhe," Marion said.

"And do you bring an accomplice, and will you steal the Cu Sith for the fairies?" the giant said. "Well, he's in the stable, and the key's safe in my pocket." He sighed. "'Tis a fool who plays host to a thief. Nevertheless, my hero, you and the lady Phillips shall be my guests tonight. In the morning I'll have you at breakfast."

Phillips gnawed his right arm; Jon and Marion blanched. As they tiptoed toward the door, the giant said, "The power of seeing is in my ears. Away from the door, you two, away! Show them to their room, Bob."

"We wanted only to bring our luggage inside," Phillips said.

"Ye'll ha'all ye need in yer rooms," Bob said, brandishing a club. "Now follow me."

"What did he mean, his seeing is in his ears?" Marion asked.

"Just as he said, ma'am," Bob replied. He showed them into a bedroom and locked the human-sized door set in the giant door. Jon began pounding the inset door.

"Ye be quiet in there," Bob shouted. "The giant, he likes his sleep. And so do I."

"You be quiet," Marion shouted back. "How can you let him eat us? Let us out!"

Jon pounded again on the door, wincing as splinters lanced his palms, and Marion shouted again. Phillips began kicking a tin washbasin.

"Now then, now then, ye be quiet," Bob shouted. "The giant, he's a mean-tempered lout!"

"Escape with us," Phillips said, giving his foot a rest. "He won't know we've gone."

"I told ye, his seeing's in his ears," Bob said. "Once he's heard yer voice, he can find ye no matter where ye are."

Phillips resumed kicking the washbasin. In a moment Jon heard Bob curse and a key turn in the lock. As Bob opened the door, Jon grabbed his collar and threw him down. Marion bound him with fringe that Phillips ripped



from the bedspread.

The Petersons and Phillips ran down the hall until they heard the giant snoring. They crept into his room. In the darkness they blundered into bed legs and boot heels. Jon tangled himself in curtains, spun loose, and brushed against the giant's pants draped over a chair. He unlaced the giant's boot; with the lace threaded through his belt loop, he shinned up the chair leg. Leaning into the pocket, he tied the shoelace to the key and hauled it out. But the shoelace chafed his raw hands. His fingers opened. The key clattered to the floor.

Awakened, the giant rolled out of bed and groped for the intruders. Marion clung to a bedpost, Phillips bolted for the door, but the giant snatched them both.

"I'll have a midnight snack, I will," the giant said. Jon jumped onto the giant's foot and bit his calf, but

he hurt him no more than a cat might have. The giant shook him off and strode into the hall.

Dragging the key, Jon ran after him. As he passed a door, a gust of wind over the threshold knocked him against the wall.

That door must open onto the courtyard, Jon thought. If I can let the Cu Sith out--

Though the inset door was locked, its hinges had rusted and its frame had rotted. He kicked it open.

He pulled the key across the courtyard and climbed the crossed boards on the stable door. He tied the shoelace around the doorknob. He heard a dog -- the size of a yearling bull, Phillips had said -- pacing the width of the stable. The dog growled and lunged against the door. Jon lost his grip and fell. He landed on his back; a wrinkle of frozen soil bruised his right shoulder.

He climbed the crossed boards again. Hanging from the knob by his bloody left hand, he tried to put the key in the lock with his right hand. The Cu Sith lunged against the door. Jon swung away from the lock and then crashed into it. His hand slipped off the knob; he grabbed the shoelace, but it cut his palms as he slid four feet, five. He wiped the blood from his hands and climbed the door a third time.

Again and again the dog lunged. Jon caught the rhythm. While the Cu Sith gathered itself to lunge again, Jon pushed the key in, hung from its end, and let his weight turn it. The door creaked open.

Jon fell under the Cu Sith as it streaked out of the stable. He felt the monster's tongue and teeth, its claws on his chest; he gagged on its breath.

The air in the stable darkened and

thickened into a shape edged with blue crackling flame. Jon knew it for a witch. He watched her gather the flame in a ball at her fingertips. Shrieking, she hurled it at the Cu Sith. Jon leaped, catching the blue flame full in the chest.

A cock crowed; as if obeying a command, the witch vanished. The Cu Sith ran on into the castle, down the hall, into the kitchen. Spying the giant, it bayed three times and sprang at him. The watch officer of a ship off the Cornish coast heard the bays and shuddered. But Jon could not hear them, nor could he follow the dog to see it rend the giant's throat.

Marion and Phillips ran from the kitchen to look for Jon. The castle's stone walls were fading, and here and there floor and ceiling were snow and night sky. Beds, tables, and chairs faded; even Bob's bonds faded, and he ran from the castle across the moor to a village. Through the gray veil of a fading wall Marion saw Jon's body. She screamed. His face and hands were shriveled, his chest blackened.

Hooves rang on the frozen sod. The Cu Sith loped from the castle to greet Niamh and the council as they rode to Jon's side. Niamh dismounted.

"She has not the right to take an innocent's life," Niamh said. She rested Jon's head on her lap and stroked it three times.

For the last time Marion and Phillips heard harp and bells. Then they stood in the Petersons' living room; Jon lay on the couch. As first light came through the east windows, Jon's eyes opened.

"'Sunny country,' indeed," he told Phillips. "Snow all around."

"Come with me sometime in spring," Phillips said.

